

# SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

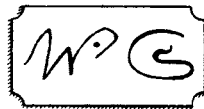
AN ANNUAL SURVEY OF  
SHAKESPEARIAN STUDY & PRODUCTION

I

EDITED BY  
ALLARDYCE NICOLL

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# STUDIES IN THE ELIZABETHAN STAGE SINCE 1900

BY

ALLARDYCE NICOLL

Of one thing in particular Shakespearian scholarship during the past fifty years may justly be proud: only within the present century have we approached within measurable distance of an understanding of the methods employed in the original production of Elizabethan plays or endeavoured to set these plays, in our imagination, firmly against the background of their theatrical environment. No other field of investigation more characteristically belongs to our own age than this.

## 1. THE ELIZABETHAN STAGE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Even in recognizing the truth of this fact, however, we should not close our eyes to the very real achievements made in this direction by the romantic period preceding our own. Fully a hundred and fifty years ago that vigorous investigator, Edmund Malone, had succeeded in defining some of the main features of the theatres in which Shakespeare had worked. Although he possessed no information about the earliest of all professional London playhouses, the Theatre in Shoreditch, and was not sure when the Globe was built, he knew that the actors originally performed in inn-yards, that the home of Shakespeare's company was round or polygonal, that the audience stood in the yard or sat in the galleries, that dramatic action proceeded both on an upper-stage and on a lower and that the plays were graced with few or no scenic embellishments.

Following Malone came numerous other scholars, each intent on unearthing documentary material, each adding his discoveries to the common store: Collier, Cunningham, Halliwell-Phillipps and others thus actively added to the accumulation of knowledge until, by the century's end, men had a very fair general conception of the way in which the Elizabethan stage differed from the kind of theatre made colourful by an Irving and a Tree.

What is even more significant is the fact that, before the nineteenth century had reached its meridian, such accumulated knowledge was being put to practical use. On 16 March 1844, Benjamin Webster, lessee and director of the Haymarket, presented *The Taming of the Shrew* in a doubly novel manner: he not only gave it in the original text—a startling innovation after years of manhandling—he adopted a fresh method of production. There was a painted set of an inn for the 'Induction'; the scene then changed to the interior of a hall, to remain unaltered for the rest of the comedy. The Katherine-Petruchio play-within-the-play was enacted with "two screens and a pair of curtains" as "the whole dramatic apparatus". The comment of *The Times* critic is interesting:

By the mere substitution of one curtain for another [he explained to his readers] change of scene was indicated, and all the entrances and exits are through the centre of the curtain, or round the screens, the place represented being denoted by a printed placard fastened to the curtain. This arrangement, far from being flat and ineffective, tended to give closeness to the action, and by constantly

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allowing a great deal of stage room, afforded a sort of freedom to all the parties engaged. The audience did not in the least seem to feel the absence of scenery, and though the play lasted three hours and a half, the attention of the house never failed.

This was an interesting experiment, but something even more radical was happening contemporaneously in Germany. Ludwig Tieck, celebrated translator of Shakespeare and romantic enthusiast for all things Elizabethan, characteristically found in the Globe stage material for a theatrical philosophy. The theatre of his own time, he declared, was a theatre of illusion—an *Illusionsbühne*—but the illusion towards which it aspired was false and calculated to destroy the true poetic illusion. Warmly supported by the poet, dramatist and producer Karl Immermann, he argued that the Elizabethan bare open platform stage—the *Raumbühne*—offered far greater opportunities for the achieving of theatrical effect than the picture-frame stage cluttered up with its distracting wings, backcloths and built-up scenes. As a result, Immermann presented a production of *Twelfth Night* in a specially constructed set which, although it professedly aimed at a reproduction of the Shakespearian stage, was strongly reminiscent of the classical-type proscenium of the sixteenth-century Teatro Olimpico at Vicenza—with a long narrow open platform enclosed by a façade broken by four entrance doors and a kind of inner-stage at the rear. Meanwhile, Tieck himself, in 1843, gave a production of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* at Potsdam, in which various levels, connected by stairs, together with curtained pillars took the place of the usual scenery.

Nor was this by any means all. The ideas of Tieck and Immermann were taken up and considerably expanded some forty years later at Munich. The enthusiastic reformer in this instance was Jozsa Savits, a Hungarian director who came to identify himself with the German theatre. In 1889 *King Lear* was given, under his supervision, at the Hoftheater with a built-up setting intended to approximate the Elizabethan forms. A rounded platform jutted out beyond the curtain-line and was provided with steps leading down into the orchestra. Within the proscenium-frame was shown an open stage backed by a façade, which in turn revealed an inner-stage where scenic backcloths could be displayed. From a contemporary illustration of the storm scene it is obvious that Savits sought to bring his action well to the front of the platform.

All of these endeavours are important, and collectively they demonstrate the ancient truth—that however much we may vaunt our modernity we invariably find, often to our dismay and disgust, that our fondly treasured discoveries have been anticipated many decades before our own time. Inspired by knowledge of the principles of Elizabethan production, men were talking about the 'space-stage' already in the forties of the last century.

Yet, significant as were all these experiments, the year 1900 left the world of Shakespearian scholarship, and the world of the theatre, with a lamentably inadequate awareness of the particular methods by which the known principles were applied. Not only were all these experiments isolated efforts, but the basis of detailed information was largely lacking. It was not until near the end of this period, in 1888, that an illustration of an Elizabethan theatre interior was discovered. In that year K. T. Gaedertz issued his *Zur Kenntnis der altenglischen Bühne* with a reproduction of the now familiar 'De Witt' drawing of the Swan (Plate III): the importance of this discovery was immediately recognized and the same year H. B. Wheatley brought it to the attention of English readers. So illuminating is this drawing and so much has it formed the foundation for all recent

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discussion of the Elizabethan stage that we may indeed well wonder how Malone and Tieck succeeded at all in forming even the vaguest mental image of the theatre that Shakespeare used, and we may assuredly forgive them for any uncertainties in their interpretation of the meagre evidence at their disposal.

### 2. THE ELIZABETHAN PUBLIC THEATRE AND ITS WAYS

What the past fifty years have accomplished rests partly in the amassing of further information concerning the Elizabethan theatre as a whole, partly in the minuter scrutiny of evidence with the object of determining the precise methods used by the actors of that time and partly in the application of the accumulated knowledge to the discussion of the plays in general, to the elucidation of puzzling elements in their action, and to the interpretation of the dramatic characters. We are thus concerned both with the various contributions to knowledge effected by individual scholars and with the development of an entirely fresh interpretative path pursued by literary critics as a result of these contributions. There is, indeed, hardly any aspect of Shakespearian study, from bibliography to poetic imagery, which has not been influenced by this kind of investigation: concepts of the nature of acting texts determine the conclusions reached by editors; characters are explained by reference to a particular actor's age, height or manner; groups of plays are discussed not in terms of Shakespeare's supposed psychological development, but in those of changing tastes in the audience or of the shifting personnel of his company.

#### THE LANDMARKS

Obviously, the first thing we have to consider is the physical stage and the conditions appertaining to its performances. In this area of study the period with which we are concerned, 1900-47, is neatly divided in half by the appearance, in 1923, of two utterly diverse contributions to knowledge. The former is C. H. Herford's *Sketch of Recent Shakespearian Investigation*, which so ably and entertainingly surveys the main trends of scholarly study from the nineties of the last century, and which enables us, in this present 'sketch', to pay less attention to the early decades and to stress, in particular, the achievements of 1923-47. The second work consists of the four invaluable red volumes of Sir Edmund Chambers's *The Elizabethan Stage*. Here indeed is a convenient and commodious half-way house on the road of research wherein we may rest and contemplate earlier accomplishments. At the same time, before and after it there stand numerous other lesser resting-places, each marking a lap of the journey. We start, as it were, from a little international camp where scholars English, American, French, and German have set up their tents during the first years of the century. Here is Carl Brodmeier hoisting the flag of the now wholly discredited 'alternation' theory, which assumes that Shakespeare so constructed his plays as to allow an inner-stage scene to follow each scene on the outer-stage—an assumption clearly influenced by nineteenth-century ideas and not yet freed from concepts based on contemplation of the picture-frame conventions. Here is the worthy William Archer, writing a long essay in *The Quarterly Review* for 1908 on "What We Know of the Elizabethan Stage". Here is Achilles with his myrmidons in the person of C. W. Wallace jealously assembling a treasury of new facts concerning the playhouses. Here is the genial G. F. Reynolds breaking new ground by his stimulating, and perhaps not fully appreciated, booklet on *Some Principles of Elizabethan Staging*

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(1905). Here is W. S. Godfrey applying himself to an architectural reconstruction of the Fortune. Here is J. T. Murray surveying theatrical activities in the provinces. And, above all, here is W.W. Greg meticulously and brilliantly editing documents essential for any exact study of the Elizabethan theatre.

The second decade of the century is ushered in by the lively series of essays collected together in W. J. Lawrence's *The Elizabethan Playhouse* (1912-13); Lawrence and Archer join forces to prepare the article on the playhouse in *Shakespeare's England* (1916); T. S. Graves discusses the court and the actors (1913); A. H. Thorndike produces his *Shakespeare's Theatre* (1916), and the year following appears J. Q. Adams's important survey, *Shakespearean Playhouses*.

From the appearance in 1923 of Chambers's volumes onwards to our own time contributions to the subject have been no less numerous. There have been fewer discoveries of new documents, but these later investigations have done valuable work in diverse directions—by still more intensive analysis of the source material, by extension of the field of study and, especially, by shifting attention from general discussion to the discussion of particular instances and by further relating the plays to the stages for which they were written. In 1927 comes T. W. Baldwin's *Organization and Personnel of the Shakespearian Company*. The same year sees the publication of the almost symbolic 'Shakespeare Association' volume on *Shakespeare and the Theatre* and the first of Harley Granville-Barker's *Prefaces*. Sir Edmund Chambers completes his great work by the publication of his *William Shakespeare* in 1930, and about the same time a young American scholar, G. E. Bentley, who is later (*The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, 1941) to carry on Chambers's work, begins to publish some of his first articles on Elizabethan actors. Miss M. C. Bradbrook's *Elizabethan Stage Conditions* comes in 1932; 1935 brings the first true attempt to estimate the quality of the Elizabethan audience (A. C. Sprague's), followed by Alfred Harbage's more detailed study in 1941; in the years immediately following renewed attention is paid to the methods of acting, and, more significantly, to the study of individual theatres—notably the Globe and the Red Bull. In most of these later essays an important trend is the attempt to shift attention from the purely 'Shakespearian' and to throw light on Shakespeare's work as it were by indirection, through the more intensive study of his contemporaries and of the conditions under which they wrote. It is not merely the stage of Shakespeare that concerns the scholars but, more generally, the stage of the Elizabethans.

### THE PUBLIC THEATRES

The entire area of ground thus covered clearly separates itself into knowledge of (a) the physical appearance of the theatres, (b) the personnel engaged in interpreting the plays, (c) their methods of work, and (d) the demands of the spectators for whom this work was done.

So far as the theatres themselves are concerned, perhaps the most important task accomplished by the earliest workers in the field has been the demonstration that in Shakespeare's time three distinct types of theatrical enterprise have to be accounted for—the public playhouses, the private and the court. Naturally, of these three the first assumes predominant importance if only because of Shakespeare's association with the Lord Chamberlain's men, but increasing attention has come, during the past five decades, to be paid also to the other two, with the realization that this company also possessed a 'private' house, that some of Shakespeare's plays are likely to have been penned

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for special (court or other) performances and that towards the end of his career he was probably influenced by that typical production of the court stage—the masque.

The general conclusions reached before 1923 regarding the appearance of the public theatres are, of course, put forth in detail by Chambers, and his bibliographical notes amply show how much important evidence we owe to the researchers of the twentieth century. Certain things have now been determined and are accepted without controversy, although, even after all the devoted work applied to this theme, questions still remain.

### THE INNER-STAGE

About the platform stage and the gallery above it there is no debate, but as soon as we move from these comfortably assured features of the Elizabethan playhouse trouble begins. A simple, and excellent, example is the question of the inner-stage. We speak familiarly of its existence and of course we know by implication that something of the kind was used by the actors; we even know that it had a technical name. Yet the 'De Witt' drawing shows no central opening in its rear wall, while discussion of certain particular 'study' scenes questions how precisely they could have been played there and still kept in view of the audience. Debate has been lengthy, at times acrimonious, and even yet, with our accumulated store of evidence, we remain in doubt.

This example, however, raises an interesting point. At the beginning of the century, scholars engaged in exploring such subjects tended gladly to take evidence from any and every source: later, when it was recognized that staging at a 'private' playhouse may have been, and probably was, different from staging at a public theatre, the next generation of scholars turned to select evidence only from large groups of plays known to have been performed at the one type of theatre or the other. It is only within the very last few years that this process of selection has been carried to a further level, and in so extending the method of selection the latest studies suggest that perhaps herein lies a possibility of more closely determining the truth. Thus, for instance, G. F. Reynolds essays a new path by confining his attention to dramas which had been specifically written for one particular theatre, the Red Bull: this leads him to interesting and even revolutionary conclusions. Apart from the fact that his investigation forces him to suggest that, in this theatre at least, various three-dimensional, practicable pieces of scenery were either set on the outer-stage throughout a play or were brought in for particular episodes, he puts forward a novel hypothesis regarding the inner-stage. It has frequently been assumed that the 'De Witt' drawing is defective. There must have been an inner-stage, it is argued; therefore the absence of a central opening in the rear wall of the drawing must be due to the fact that the artist omitted to indicate it. Now Reynolds comes forward with the tentatively and cautiously expressed suggestion that the inner-stage of the Red Bull was possibly nothing more than a curtained framework which could, when need arose, be set up towards the back of the outer-stage. Being a careful scholar (and in this tricky realm of research it is only through the exercise of the very greatest care that any valid results can be reached) Reynolds does not present this as an ascertained fact: yet his evidence is strong and, if it comes to be supported by other evidence similarly obtained, not only shall we have to look once more at the 'De Witt' drawing in a new light, but also we shall be compelled to revise some of our fondest theories regarding Elizabethan staging.

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### THE UPPER-STAGE

This example may be paralleled by another. In 1942 appeared a work by J. C. Adams, entitled *The Globe Playhouse*, in which an effort is made to give similar attention to the theatre owned by Shakespeare's company. Less cautious than Reynolds, more inclined to leap to conclusions perhaps not wholly warranted by the documentary material available and less rigorous in his selective process, Adams advances several views likely to be rejected by further scrutiny of the subject, but one main hypothesis certainly seems justified by the references he employs—that a very considerable alteration was made in the form of the stage, and especially in that of the upper-stage, when the Globe succeeded the Theatre. If this be accepted, then once more a number of previously accepted conclusions will have to be laid aside. Taking Adams's study along with Reynolds's, we shall probably be right if we accept the conclusions that further advance in our knowledge is likely to come only from a series of selective studies and that, even within the realm of the public playhouse, variety of shape and perhaps variety in staging method prevailed. To seek for consistency here is, as Reynolds suggests, to risk taking ourselves off the track.

### THE SITE AND SHAPE OF THE GLOBE

In what an uncertain world we move within this playhouse world is illustrated by a further series of arguments in Adams's work. We are still not absolutely sure of the exact site of the Globe, although the lively debate on the subject during the early twenties may be accepted as closing with a decisive victory for W. W. Braines's argument that the theatre stood to the south of Park Street (Maiden Lane). This question of the site may not be of first-class importance, but the shape of the theatre's structure is—and after these many years of study we find Adams dismissing the belief that Shakespeare's theatre was round. It is important to know whether it was round or polygonal, not because the rotundity or the polygonality would make any material difference in the disposition of the audience but because the one shape would necessarily yield a different stage form from the other. I. A. Shapiro's essay in the present issue of *Shakespeare Survey* discusses this problem anew (see pp. 25-37): as he indicates, there is still much to be accomplished in the way of exact and detailed research into certain particular, and relatively important, problems.

### THE SIZE OF THE GLOBE

If we desire still a further example akin to those provided by Reynolds and Adams, we may take one point in Harbage's excellent book on *Shakespeare's Audience*. Quite clearly, one thing above all others that we want to know is the number of persons normally attendant at a performance in the Globe Theatre. We are all aware that a production in a small house has an entirely different 'feel' from a production in a large house, and consequently it is essential for us, if we wish to have an imaginative picture of an Elizabethan performance, to determine whether we are to place ourselves amid a great mass of London's citizens or amid a few score of spectators. Although contemporary visitors to London in the sixteenth century had spoken of theatres accommodating 'thousands', some students have sought to deny the accuracy of these contemporary statements.

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De Witt's figure of a 3,000 seating capacity, "even though often mistakenly read as the total capacity of the Swan, has met with determined incredulity", and Greg has gone so far as to allow the Fortune a gallery accommodation of only several hundreds. Now comes Harbage, who, concentrating all his attention on this one subject, succeeds, by a series of ingenious cross-checking calculations, in demonstrating conclusively that after all the foreign visitors were right. The Globe Theatre must have held an audience of between two and three thousand. By applying himself to the consideration of a particular question this scholar has provided us with a significant certainty.

### THE QUALITY OF THE AUDIENCE

Another excellent service has been rendered by Harbage and others. In earlier volumes the spectators at the public theatres were given short shrift: they were described as noisy, evil-smelling, crude and brutal—until we were almost prepared to shed tears for gentle Shakespeare and to sigh because of the pearls of poetry cast before such swine. The danger of an unscholarly approach to such subjects is well revealed in the impressionistic essay penned by Robert Bridges for the 'Stratford Town' edition of the works.

Shakespeare [he declares] should not be put into the hands of the young without the warning that the foolish things in his plays are for the foolish, the filthy for the filthy, and the brutal for the brutal; and that, if out of veneration for his genius we are led to admire or even tolerate such things, we may be thereby not conforming ourselves to him, but only degrading ourselves to the level of his audience, and learning contamination from those wretched beings who can never be forgiven their share in preventing the greatest poet and dramatist of the world from being the best artist.

Fortunately the application of scholarly method to this subject enables an entirely different picture to emerge. Particularly from Harbage's study, and also from those of Sprague and H. S. Bennett (*Shakespeare's Audience*, 1944), we get a vision, amply based on exact information, of a vigorous, intellectually alert public, anxious to listen to the high-astounding terms of the stage and by no means prepared to waste their entrance-money by making of the auditorium a rowdy arena.

### THE ACTORS

In a kindred manner, recent scholarship has caused us to revise our conception of the actors. During earlier periods of study there had been a glimmering awareness that some of the Elizabethan players were sober men of high integrity, excellent in the quality they professed, but the legend of rogues and vagabonds died hard, and only within the past decades have we come to realize that Shakespeare's fellows were no roistering bohemians just one degree removed from jailbirds, but staid, capable, hardworking interpreters of his lines. What is particularly interesting, apart from this, in recent essays, is the endeavour—admittedly a hazardous task yet one well worth while attempting—to relate, as it were, the actors to the plays. Groups within the acting community are examined and their qualities expressed; thus Hillebrand discusses the minor players' roles (1922) and those of the boy players (1927). Interest in these performers and, at the same time, realization of their importance in our consideration of Shakespeare's plays are attested by the

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ardent search for biographical information such as has been sought for the authors of the time: here G. E. Bentley and M. Denkinger have done especially useful work. Edwin Nungezer publishes a dictionary of the players: individual performers are given attention, as, for example, in Allison Gaw's discussion of John Sinklo's possible connection with Romeo's Apothecary and Bottom's Starveling or in H. D. Gray's assignment of parts to Will Kemp. The way in which such studies impinge upon literary investigation is well shown in Granville-Barker's discussion of "The Casting of *Hamlet*" (1936) or in John Wilcox's suggestion (1941) that the part of Jaques, of no significance in the plot development of *As You Like It*, was an insertion made by Shakespeare when Burbage had grown too old to act Orlando. T. W. Baldwin essays a general study of the Lord Chamberlain's men and J. Engelen ("Die Schauspieler-Oekonomie in Shakespeares Dramen", 1926) endeavours to show how dependent were the dramatists upon the number of actors available. At the same time, attempts are made to explain and draw inferences from the appearance of actors' names in the texts of some of Shakespeare's plays. Thus, in our growing assurance, do we dare to set the door of the dramatist's workshop ajar and to move backstage into the tiring room.

The very latest attempt is to determine the style—formalized or realistic—of Elizabethan histrionic traditions. This new ground, entirely unprospected hitherto, was broken first by Georg Hartmann in 1924; more fruitful results have, however, been obtained only within the last few years. Much yet remains to be done in this field, but Harbage's study of Elizabethan acting (1939), supported by further notes by W. F. McNeir, gives some reason to believe that a formalized method was in common use.

### PUBLIC THEATRE ENTERTAINMENT

We now have knowledge, through a long series of investigations, about the accompaniments of the actors. Louis B. Wright and W. J. Lawrence have been indefatigable in gathering information on almost every conceivable aspect of Elizabethan stage entertainment. We now know about variety shows on the stage, the use of animals in plays and juggling tricks: from bagpipes to bells we have before us an array of the actors' properties. Although the subject of Elizabethan stage costume has been inadequately prospected, M. Channing Linthicum's *Costume in the Drama of Shakespeare* (1936) provides us with some useful information on the dress of the time and on references to it in the plays. Most important material is presented in C. R. Baskerville's *The Elizabethan Jig* (1929) and the significance of dramatic song has been analysed by Richmond Noble and others.

Variety entertainment suggests connections with that peculiar form of Italian improvised performance which for convenience is called the *commedia dell' arte*, and to this too attention has been devoted. In Italy itself, in England, and in America the scope of the Italian popular drama has recently been surveyed in a collection of volumes and further work along the same lines is still proceeding: the latest, the third volume of Mario Apollonio's *Storia del teatro italiano*, has indeed just appeared (1946). Many of these works are only indirectly related to the subject of the present survey, but some, such as Kathleen M. Lea's *Italian Popular Comedy* (1934), devote chapters to consideration of the possible influence of the improvised drama upon the actors of Shakespeare's time and upon Shakespeare himself. In addition, various essays have been written with these